

By the Kansas State Historical Society

## Traveling the Santa Fe Trail

### Why Travel the Trail?

The Santa Fe Trail was an important trail between the United States and Mexico. People in both countries wanted to buy and sell merchandise from each other. Merchants used the trail to make money by hauling items to sell when they reached the end of the trail.

In 1821 William Becknell was the first American who traded legally with people in Santa Fe, Mexico. That was the year Mexico won freedom from Spain. Mexico now was its own country.



The Santa Fe Trail was about 900 miles long. It went from Independence, Missouri, to Santa Fe. Almost 500 miles of the trail was in Kansas.



Mexico no longer had to trade only with Spain. It could decide for itself what to do. The United States made many things that people in Mexico wanted. Mexicans wanted candle molds, medicine, fabric, coffee mills, slate pencils, and clothes. These were made

in factories, something Santa Fe did not have. Mexico had many raw materials that people in the United States wanted. Americans wanted beaver pelts, wool from sheep, gold, silver, and mules.



### **What Did They Need for the Journey?**

The first traders carried their goods on mules and horses. Later traders used large wagons with oxen. They learned that they could carry more goods this way. The more they could carry, the more money they could make. Some wagons were so large that it took 10 or 12 mules to pull each wagon. These wagons carried about 6,000 pounds of goods.

Traders used the trail during the spring, summer, and fall. A trip took about 50 to 60 days one way. Wagons traveled about 15 miles each day.

### **What Happened to the Trail?**

On February 16, 1880, the Atchinson, Topeka, & Santa Fe Railway reached Santa Fe. Trains carried goods much faster than wagons. Business on the Santa Fe Trail came to an end.